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El Salvador

COUNTRY

A five-man jury in El Salvador has found Salvadoran Army Colonel Guillermo Benavides and an Army Lieutenant guilty in the November 1989 murder of six Jesuit priests and two women, acquitting seven other lower-ranking defendants, according to press. The judge now has a month to pass sentence, which could range from twenty to thirty years in prison.

Comment: The verdict indicates the jury assigned little responsibility to the lower-ranking defendants who were carrying out orders when they committed the murders. Benavides' conviction is an important precedent--he is the first high ranking Salvadoran officer to be found guilty of a human rights violation--which may help convince the FMLN guerrillas that the military is no longer above the law. The less-than-sweeping verdict, however, will not immediately placate government critics, who will continue to assert that the court failed to indict senior officers whom they believe ordered the murders.

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